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C O N F I D E N T I A L LUSAKA 001109

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV ZA

SUBJECT: UNREST ON COPPERBELT FOLLOWING CATHOLIC PRIEST'S ARREST FOR RADIO BROADCAST

Classified By: DCM Michael Koplovsky, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (SBU) Summary. The arrest of a prominent radio broadcaster following a call-in show featuring callers who encouraged any citizens dissatisfied with the October 30 elections to participate in a Patriotic Front-sponsored rally provided the spark that young PF cadres were previously lacking. Riots broke out in the station's Copperbelt home base of Kitwe. Some looting of stores in the town center has been reported. Father Frank Bwalya, who is the station manager of Radio Chengelo and the moderator of the call-in show, was released by police during the afternoon of November 13 and has aired condemnations of any kind of violence. According to sources, PF president Michael Sata feels the GRZ has to deal with its own mess and has no plans for a public statement to calm the situation. End summary.

¶12. (U) Police arrested Father Frank Bwalya, station manager of independent Catholic radio outlet "Radio Chengelo" in the Copperbelt, on November 12 following a live call-in show during which, according to media and other reports, Bwalya apparently expressed doubts about the freedom and fairness of the October 30 presidential by-election. Bwalya also pointed to sharply rising mealie meal (corn flour, a staple of the Zambian diet) prices as a sign of the failure of the new Banda government. Callers to the show picked up on Bwalya's dissatisfaction and apparently urged other listeners to participate in an already-planned PF rally on November 15 in Kitwe. The PF was billing the rally as a "peaceful demonstration" to register their displeasure with the conduct of the recent presidential election.

¶13. (U) Police arrived to shut down the show while Bwalya was still on air, but according to press reports, Bwalya locked himself in the studio until the show was over. Police then took Bwalya away.

¶14. (U) Bwalya remained in custody overnight. Police apparently attempted to transfer Bwalya from one police station to another during the morning of November 13, and threatened reporters who were nearby not to follow the police car. In the process, the police car encountered groups of PF cadres who reportedly had been bused in to downtown Kitwe. A riot began, and police reported some looting as well as the blockage of the main road into Kitwe with burning tires. As of 1700 local time on November 13, the Kitwe downtown was deserted, and some rioters had been arrested.

¶15. (C) Bwalya was released during the afternoon of November 13 and subsequently spoke with Embassy PAO. He said that after his release he went immediately to his radio station to broadcast an appeal for calm and to reassure supporters that he was in good condition. According to Bwalya, he has been charged with "issuing statements that cause hostility between groups, stating that the elections were fraudulent, and saying that President Banda was not legitimately elected." He is scheduled to appear in court on November 27 and says that he will plead not guilty.

¶16. (C) Embassy staff picked up a rumor circulating that Father Bwalya was intending to abandon the priesthood in favor of joining the PF, but PF Secretary General Edward Mumbi told pol/econ chief that Bwalya has no formal connection to his party (Bwalya also confirmed this to PAO). When asked whether PF president Michael Sata had plans to

intervene and calm the situation, Mumbi said "such a statement would politicize the situation, and this is the government's bed to sleep in." Mumbi also said the GRZ had revoked the PF's permit for its November 15th rally and refused to condemn the looting in Kitwe which he also attributed to the rising price of mealie meal.

17. (C) Comment. Bwalya's arrest after callers encouraged participation in what the PF said was to be a peaceful demonstration provided just the spark that frustrated young PF loyalists had been lacking. From the PF's perspective, the GRZ's heavy-handedness presents a rare opportunity to be the good guy, and from Mumbi's comments, it looks like the PF will take full advantage. Bwalya is a charismatic and well-spoken leader, and the GRZ will have its hands full dealing with the fall out from this ill-advised arrest. The GRZ announced that President Banda would give a press conference on November 14, perhaps to address this issue but the long-delayed announcement of a cabinet is also a possibility (and a welcome distraction from the point of view of the GRZ). End comment.

BOOTH